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ABSTRACT

Wilderness Adventure, an Elderhostel course sponsored by Unity College in Maine, gives people over 60 the challenge of living and traveling in a remote wilderness environment. Each course consists of four days of canoeing and a day of rappelling in northern Maine. The program attempts to provide older adults with a personal growth experience via wilderness challenges, group initiatives, group discussions, journal writing, and rappelling. Other program goals include (1) teaching participants the outdoor skills necessary for safe functioning in a wilderness setting; (2) increasing participants' environmental awareness and respect and knowledge about Maine's natural environment and history; (3) teaching group cooperation and the process of open communication within the group; and (4) involving participants in the decision making process. This document describes the five days of the course in detail, with participants' comments. It discusses administrative aspects of the program, including (1) provision of a detailed account of the course's rigors to prospective participants; (2) importance of comprehensive participant medical forms; (3) safety; (4) evacuation procedures; and (5) the role and training of group leaders. (SV)

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ADVENTURE AFTER 60 - WORKING WITH ELDERS IN THE OUTDOORS

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> "So now it's over. But not all over! The wave of experience we shared will ripple on and on. The murkiness, dirt, and sand --- the pains, the fears, the frustrations and deep fatigue --- all these will settle out, leaving the clear, sparkling waters of mutually shared experience, respect, and friendship to lap clearly on the shores of our memories."

This quote was written by a participant on an Elderhostel course entitled "Wilderness Adventure" sponsored by Unity College in Maine. The program is designed to give people over the age of 60 an experience living and traveling in a remote wilderness environment. Each course consists of four days of canoeing and a day of rappelling in Northern Maine. Through participation in this challenging program, participants will learn the skills necessary to safely function in a wilderness setting, will experience personal growth through challenge, will increase awareness of and respect for the natural environment, and will become involved in a group living situation.

Elderhostel is a network of colleges, universities, and independent educational institutions in the United States and abroad which offer special short-term, residential academic programs for older adults. According to the brochure, Elderhostel is for elders on the move in terms of reaching out to new experiences. The program is based on the belief that

retirement does not have to mean withdrawal, but that one's later years are an opportunity to enjoy new challenges.

Unity College, a small, environmentally oriented 4-year college located in central Maine, has been involved in Elderhostel since 1979, offering courses such as Introduction to Microcomputers, Ecology of Inland Maine, Grass Roots in the Environment, and Maine Literature. In 1982 the idea developed to offer a wilderness course for elders. The idea came from the fact that people are living longer and are increasingly active at an older age and that the need for adventure and challenge does not decrease with age. The life expectancy for an infant born in 1978 is 73.3 years compared to the 47 years of an infant born at the beginning of the 20th century. After retirement at age 65, a person has approximately 20% more years of life remaining before death occurs (Leviton, 1980).

Because of the increase in life expectancy, people are becoming more interested in the concept of "successful aging", which according to Palmore (1979) has been equated with life satisfaction. The predictors of life satisfaction are socio-economic status, personality, perceived health, activity, and intimate friendships above and beyond one's family.

Although adventure challenge programs have little to do with socio-economic status, they do have a direct influence on the remaining predictors. The goals of adventure challenge programs relate directly to life satisfaction. As a result of the successful completion of challenging activities, the development

of personality is seen through an increase in self confidence and self esteem, self discovery, leadership development, creativity, and decision making. People become aware of the importance of good physical and mental health. Many new skills are learned and developed on adventure courses, skills which participants can continue in their personal lives after the course is finished. Close bonds develop between group members as a result of sharing and intense personal experience. Many of these intimate friendships continue long after the course is over (Miles, 1980).

Abraham Maslow describes certain activities in adventure challenge programs as "peak experiences." "People feel more unified and whole at such moments, more at the creating center of their activities and perceptions. These are certainly positive feelings. They are a reminder that people can grow and go beyond perceived limits" (Miles, 1980). People do not lose their need for challenge, their need for adventure, their need to push beyond their preceived limits as they grow older. Because many of the adventure challenge programs in existance today offer courses for only younger clientele, it was felt that there is a definite need for such programs for older persons. The Elderhostel wilderness program at Unity College developed because of this need.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The course is advertised in the Elderhostel catalog and registration is taken care of through the Boston office. After

Unity College receives the list of participants on the course, a packet is sent to each person which describes the course in detail and includes necessary information such as a clothing and equipment list, and health and assumption of risk forms. The Elderhostelers make their own arrangements for transportation, and arrive prior to the course ready for an exciting adventure.

The course begins at 9 AM on Day 1 with the group of 10 Elderhostelers and 2 instructors sitting in a circle outside of the library at Unity College. Each person is asked to describe what attracted him or her to the course, and what goals he or she has for the week.

The instructors pass out a notebook to each participant with information about the upcoming week: the goals the instructors have for the course, a map of the route to be taken, information sheets on the plant and animal life in the area, and some history of the area. Also included is a day-by-day journal for participants to keep while on the trip.

The group then gets involved with some activities to help break barrriers and begin to mold the 12 individuals into a group. Through communication, problem solving, and trial and error, the group successfullly completes initiatives or challenges set to them. The games are fun, and people begin to relax and enjoy being together.

> "Group together in a circle - expectations ranged from learning how to camp, pushing horizons, and Ruth's desire to see what kind of weird people would sign up for this course. We learned about

each other and found out how absolutely wonderful we are! Games of "challenges" proved we were only human; indecision until Ed provided a clue and then we were great again."

"We talked, laughed, excited each other - and we were friends. Even the lunch was arranged to promote cooperation and joint fun. If only these beautiful vignettes of life could be carried over into our "real" lives."

The afternoon is spent on a lake near the college learning the basic techniques of canoeing and camping. Individuals are responsible for the day-to-day maintenance of the group, so it is important for them to learn the skills of putting up tents, cooking on camp stoves, reading a map, guiding a canoe, and living in the woods with as little impact as possible.

"It's sunset, the end of our first day of the wilderness course. It's been a pleasant, happy day. We've made a good beginning, some of us getting into a canoe for the first time, and actually finding ourselves able to manage it within a half hour. The highlight of the day, I think, was Margaret's valient struggle to get back into the boat during a capsizing demonstration. She made it, and received a well deserved round of applause. Whatever new skills we learn or fail to learn on this trip, we will I think leave these woods with a rich memory and new friends."

The group is off early on Day 2 with a drive to their drop off point. The next 4 days are spent canoeing on the West Branch of the Penobscot River, a trip that covers miles. A typical day progresses as such:

The group rises early in the morning and divides up to accomplish chores. Some people cook breakfast (usually a hearty meal of hot cereal, fruit, eggs, coffee cake, and coffee) and the rest of the

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group breaks camp. When breakfast is finished, the canoes are loaded for the day.

Before leaving, everyone gets in a circle and participates in group stretches and exercises. One of the instructors does a reading from the readings book, a group hug is had by all, and the group is off.

The time spent paddling during the first days are relaxing in order for people to get used to being in a canoe and making their strokes work correctly. We try to break people in gradually to the rigors of paddling all day. The area is very remote, so a wide variety of birds and animals are usually seen. No trip is complete without sighting a moose chomping a meal in the shallow waters.

During rest breaks the group members reach into the two buckets that are taken on the trip. One is the surprise bucket which is filled with high energy treats: gorp, dried fruit, cookies, hard candy, etc. The resource bucket is filled with books: bird, animal, and plant identification books, books on the history of the area, Thoreau's Maine Woods, star charts, first aid books, canoeing books, story books, etc.

When the group pulls into the campsite, a stretching circle is done again before the canoes are unloaded. People seem to enjoy stretching out the muscles that have been cramped paddling all day, and are less stiff and sore the following day. People again break up to do the camp chores of cooking dinner and setting up camp. Usually while dinner is being prepared, people wander off

for some alone time to wash up, swim, write in their journals, or just sit by the water and enjoy the sunset.

Each evening the group participates in some sort of activity: folk dancing, values games, or group discussions. Participants are encouraged to share their interests and knowledge with the rest of the group, and usually come up with very creative ways of spending evenings.

Late on Day 3 the route changes from river into Chesuncook Lake. The mileage now increases, and the rigors of lake paddling are felt more with the absence of a river current. People are usually ready for the change and welcome the differences in water and scenery. As a change of pace activity, the group stops at Chesuncook Village, a small town that can only be reached by boat or float plane, and people explore the old houses and the graveyard, and stop at the Inn for tea and cookies (and a real bathroom).

The morning of Day 4 participants take part in a solo experience. Each person finds a comfortable spot on the shore or in the woods, away from the rest of the group, and sits for several hours enjoying the solitude and scenery, and reflecting on the experience.

> "I take pen with my blistered hand to attempt to record some of my feelings in regard to this camping trip. I think that when we return to civilization and relate to the civilians our experiences in the great north woods, they may find them hard to accept. Considering we are a group of people over the age of sixty, I think that what we have done and the ardor and spirit and joy with

> which we did it is something for each of us to be proud...It is not my intention to detail all of our movements but to reflect on how we accomplished them and the pleasure they gave us. Everyone cooperated beautifully, pitched in to do whatever was needed, all worked hard, remained in good humors, and by and large enjoyed a rare and very different experience."

After solo the group paddles to the take out spot and is transported to that night's camsite. The final day of the course is spent at a spectacular climbing site where participants learn the skills of rock craft and experience rappeling down a cliff.

First participants are introduced to the history of rock climbing and to the equipment used in the sport. Instructors teach a step-by-step method of tying a swiss seat, the seat harness used in the safety system of rock climbing. After each group member has correctly tied the swiss seat, the instructors demonstrate how to rappel on a short, not so steep section of the rock. Participants learn how to hook themselves into the figure 8 (the device used for rappeling), the purpose of the belay rope, and the set of verbal signals used between belayer and rappeller. Each participant can practice rappeling as many times as he or she wants, until the skill feels comfortable.

When the group is ready, they move down to the steeper section of the rock. One by one each person is hooked to the rappel rope and the belay line, gives the signals and rappels down the cliff. The rest of the group is very supportive, cheering each person as he or she descends, and giving hugs as each finishes.

> "It was then that time - we were to go over the side. Casper went first, followed by Elsa, Jim, John, Ester, Irene, Al, Margie, Marlon. It is hard

to express this writer's feeling going over the first few feet, but the feeling of doing something extra special was very great. The time spent doing the rappel seemed very short and before you knew it Shawn was there at the bottom with open arms. We left the top after getting a group hug and taking the time to give our feelings on the rappel. Everyone felt that it was a personal achievement. This writer more that agrees. It is something we will never forget."

After rappelling, the group is transported back to Unity College for a shower and clean clothes before the graduation celebration. Graduation is an important part of the course, as it represents the closure of the experience. People express themselves in terms of what they learned and what they gained personally from the course. It is a time for intense personal feelings. The ceremony begins with a traditional Maine feast of lobsters, clams and corn on the cob. After dinner the instructors bring the group into a circle and proceed with the ceremony. Each person is given a hand drawn diploma and a T-shirt as rememberances of the course. The instructors describe something special about that person; how they helped the group through a particularly hard experience, an achievement that they accomplished, or a way in which they achieved self growth. Each participant then talks about what the course meant to him or her. At this time each person presents a gift to another group member; a gift that they created during the course. It may be a song, a rock from a special beach, a mobile made from items found along the way, or a piece of birch bark. After all the gifts and diplomas are given out, people linger saying their goodbyes, and the course is over.

"It all becomes part of us to conjure up a future point with nostalgic warmth. We measure life by shared experiences and I shall not forget this

canoe trip with its awesome natural beauty and also of course the beauty of the people that made it so memorable."

ADMINISTRATIVE ASPECTS

In order for the course to run smoothly, and for participants to gain as much as possible from the experience, the administrative aspects of the program must be carefully planned and organized. These aspects include pre-course information, setting the goals of the course, schedule development, safety concerns, and leadership.

On a course such as this, it is extremely important for participants to know exactly what is going to happen so that they can decide whether or not they are capable of the physical and mental stress involved. The description of the course in the Elderhostel catalog is brief, and people need to have more information. After their registration is received at Unity College, a packet is sent to them which describes the courses in more detail: they will be living in a wilderness environment, they will be sleeping out in tents every night at a different campsite, they will be canoeing for four days, they will be required to do camp chores such as setting up tents, cooking, cleaning up, etc. A detailed health form is also sent to them and they are required to have a doctor's OK concerning their physical and mental health. It is important to be very straight forward so that people will be able to make a good personal judgement as to whether or not the course is right for them.

Setting goals for the course is important, so that participants know what to expect from the course (from a more philosophical standpoint) and what will be expected from them. The goals should include physical and emotional aspects, skills, and group living issues so that a well-rounded course will occur. The goals of the Wilderness Adventure program are as follows:

1. To provide the participant with a personal growth experience via wilderness challenges, group initiatives, group discussions, journal writing, and rappelling.

2. To have the participants learn the outdoor skills necessary for functioning in a wilderness setting; ie., canoeing, outdoor cookery, map and compass, first aid, and low impact camping.

3. To increase the participant's awareness and respect for the natural environment.

4. To increase the participant's knowledge of Maine's natural environment and history.

5. To have the participant learn to cooperate in a group setting through participation in group initiatives, group discussions, camp chores, and canoeing with various partners.

6. To have the participant learn the process of open communication with instructors and other group members.

7. To have the participant learn to be involved in the decision-making process while on the course.

When planning the schedule, it is important to plan a full week with many assorted activities, but to also allow for flexibility. The instructors will want to discover the needs and desires of the group, and will adjust the schedule accordingly. Distances must be made progressively more difficult. The group cannot be expected to canoe long distances the first day, but as their skill level and stamina increase, the mileage should also increase. the distances should be long enough to present a challenge to the group, but not too long as to become tedious.

The schedule should allow for canoeing periods to be broken up with various activities: skill development sessions such as use of map and compass, and special interest activities such as bird watching, visiting Chesuncook Village, or using the Surprise and Resource Buckets, etc. These sessions are important as they allow participants to partake in all that the instructors, other group members, and the environment have to offer.

Safety is important on any adventure course, but when working with older people in a wilderness setting, it becomes an important priority. Medical forms should have a complete range of questions dealing with the problems of older people. Instructors should read each form carefully, noting any possible problem areas. Copies of the forms should be carried on the course. Instructors should be knowledgeable of the first aid procedures specific to a population of older adults. Review

sessions on those procedures should be held for the staff before the course goes out. Be sure that in the event of an evacuation, instructors know the procedures: who to contact, where to go for help, how to proceed with the evacuation, etc. Wardens and rangers in the area should be made aware that your group will be in their region during that time and should be given a schedule of the course.

No matter how well the course has been planned, if the leadership is poor, the course will be poor. It is important in a program such as this to have leaders who are mature, creative, caring, and understanding of the needs of older people. There are many aspects of leadership on an adventure course with older participants which are different from working with a younger group, and it is necessary to train leaders in these aspects.

The first aspect is how to provide an intense yet enjoyable experience. Participants in these programs have a desire to gain as much knowledge and experience in as many areas as possible. The leader must know how to encourage and facilitate this learning by presenting varied and exciting activities. One method is through the trip booklet which is give to participants on the first day of the course. Leaders should design these booklets with their interests and knowledge in mind, as well as what the environment will have to offer. Included could be information ranging from descriptions of plant and animal life to be encountered, to history of the area, to readings pertinent to the trip, to a journal for participants. This booklet along with

the resource bucket which is filled with resource books to be used on the trip, will help fulfill the participant's desire for information.

Another method of facilitating learning is through the skill sessions taught by the leader. These sessions should again be varied and deal with topics which are pertinent to the course: use of map and compass, cooking with a Dutch Oven, climbing and rappelling, etc. The leader may be able to discover topics in which participants are knowledgeable, and encourage them to share this information with the rest of the group.

As important as an intense experience for participants is an enjoyable one. Leaders need to develop techniques for ensuring that group members are able to break away from the physical and mental stress of the course. Watching carefully can make a big difference on a difficult course. The surprise bucket is a good technique for keeping people's energy levels up and for providing a fun activity while resting. Leaders need to make sure that participants have free time during the day to relax, rest, and enjoy their surroundings. The course can be made more enjoyable again by having participants share their interests and knowledge with the rest of the group. Evenings after dinner is a good time for group members to folk dance, tell stories, give group massages, etc.

There will be many personal issues which come up on the course, and the leaders must be able to deal with them in a straightforward and caring manner. People have stereotypes of

themselves, and old people are no exception. Leaders must be able to help individuals overcome stereotypes they have of themselves and others in the group so that they can gain as much personally from the course as possible. Stereotypes that leaders may have to deal with are "I'm too old to change or grow," male versus female roles, and individual versus group needs and desires. Leaders must be able to confront behaviors or actions in individuals which are unacceptable, and be able to help the group deal with such actions and behaviors. Since most leaders will be younger than the participants, this can be a hard skill to feel comfortable with, but an important one to learn if the participants are to experience personal growth.

When planned and organized well, the course can be very rewarding for both the participants and the leaders. Participants enjoyed living as a group, which most of them had never done before, as it made them feel like they were a family. Most were amazed at how well they knew each other and how close their bonds of friendship were after being together for such a short period of time. People also enjoyed being able to let the "little kid" in themselves come out; something that they were uncomfortable with doing during their daily lives. And all participants were proud of themselves for having accomplished all that they did at their age. Leaders felt that the course was extremely difficult as the participants demanded much from them in terms of knowledge, experience and moral support, but on the other hand was extremely rewarding because of the constant feedback from participants, and because of the opportunity for them to observe definite change

and growth in group members. For all involved, the hard work and challenge was a positive experience.

In conclusion, more adventure courses for older adults are needed. There is a definite desire for programs such as this from people. The Unity College courses filled to capacity quickly, and had a long waiting list each year. This year there are several new courses listed in the Elderhostel catalog which entail adventure and challenge. Since this is a fairly new area of programming, the sharing of ideas concerning the creation, administration, and leadership of courses needs to occur. I feel that it is important for everyone to be able to experience the joys and satisfactions of living in the wilderness for an extended period of time, no matter what their age or abilities are. One of the participants on the Elderhostel program said it best: "Thank you for letting me do this course. So many people think that old people can't do these things, and won't even let us try. I appreciate your giving us this opportunity."

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